

RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC INFLUENCES
ON THE ST. JOHN TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS
(1853-1910)

RICHARD J. FEHRMAN
ST. JOHN, INDIANA

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Purdue University

January, 1971

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ST. JOHN TOWNSHIP DISTRICT SCHOOLS
(1853-1910)

INTRODUCTION.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the organization of the district schools and the religious and ethnic influences that led to the disbandment of the "district schools" in St. John Township, which covered the towns of St. John, Dyer, and Schererville.

Some background information is needed to provide a clearer understanding of the situation which led to the organization of district schools in St. John Township. A "district school" is very similar to what is now called a "neighborhood school" This definition of a district school will be inferred throughout the paper.

Not much was said in the original state constitution of Indiana about public schools. About 1822 the legislature passed a law that provided that "upon petition of twenty householders in any township, there might be ordered an election, at which three trustees should be chosen to manage the schools of the township."

In 1851, a new constitution was adopted with new school laws. It was under this new setup that in 1853 the school system of St. John Township was organized.

TOWNSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

The township of St. John was formed from Center Township by an order from the Lake County Commissioners in 1848. An election to determine the trustees was held in August of the same year.¹ John Hack, the founder of the town of St. John, was elected as trustee. The township received its name from the town.

St. John Township was and is an agrarian - small town society. It is composed of three small towns - Dyer, St. John, and Schererville. The township growth was ethnic - migrating German settlers interested in agriculture. Newcomers rapidly settled in the vicinity during the 1840's. Most of the Germans who came to St. John Township were Roman Catholic.² By 1846 such names as Schmal, Klien, Kielman, Starke, Klassen, Hermann, Gerlach and many other familiar German names were recorded.

St. John. John Hack was the original settler of present St. John. He arrived from Germany in September of 1837, during a great migration of German settlers into the new world. Hack settled on a farm located on the east side of the present town which was incorporated in 1911.

There is no knowledge of why John Hack choose the particular spot he did as his permanent future dwelling place. However, the town of St. John is considered the highest point in Lake County. The present West 93rd Street

is the county's highest ridge.

Hack built a chapel in 1843 on his land and in 1856 the Church of St. John the Evangelist was erected. Historians regard this as the mother church of Catholicism in Lake County. This chapel possibility explains the start of the first school in 1846.³

The Town of St. John seemed to be the hub of activity in the township. Most of the important affairs and meetings were usually held in St. John. Even the early Township Teacher's Institutes were held there.

Dyer. The discovery of Peat and rich deposits of heavy lake clay led to the settling of another area of the township - Dyer. Aaron Hart had much to do with the settling of Dyer. He encouraged the Joliet and Northern Railroad to establish lines thru Dyer. This was completed in 1854 and by 1855 stations and shipping facilities were completed. The Town of Dyer was platted in 1858 and incorporated in 1905.⁴ Dyer is the largest of the three towns.

Schererville. Nicholas Scherer, who also came from Germany laid out the town of Schererville in 1865 on land that he purchased from Aaron Hart. Hart owned much land in this area and in fact the little settlement of Hartsdale was named after the Hart family.

Railroads soon came to Schererville at the urging and efforts of both Scherer and Hart. Before long several lines were crossing through the town and a rather large

switch yard was established in the Hartdale section of Schererville. The town was incorporated in 1913.⁵

During the last century the census' from 1850 thru 1900 indicated that St. John Township was almost unanimously Catholic, as it was almost entirely German.⁶ The area was prosperous financially because of several crisscrossing railroads and fertile farmland.

BEGINNING OF SCHOOLS.

The Official records of the schools date from April 11, 1853. Although official records do not mention it, there appears to have been a school in St. John about 1846. This school was taught by Catholic Sisters and Brothers. Of importance was a statement in the minutes of April 16, 1853 meeting which said, "the treasurer of St. John Township is authorized to pay E. Alexander teacher of St. Johns Township in District No. 3, the amount of \$65.87 72 cts. due to the said district." This seems to indicate also the existence of a school previous to April 1853.

The Board of Trustees in there first meeting of April 11, 1853 began the organization of schools with the sum of \$171.67. The board then announced a hearing for a proposed levy of "12 cents on a hundred dollars for school purposes."

From the minutes of the Board of Trustees we can conclude that the years 1853-54 mark the first provision

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for the free public school education of the children of the early settlers who lived in the area.

During 1853 and 1854 there are records of school building and payment of teachers, but not much else is indicated until 1858, except for the levying of a 20 cent tax for building and repairing schoolhouses in the years 1857-58. In this period of Indiana history court decisions unfavorable to school laws brought school activity to a standstill until about 1858.

In 1859 the state legislature passed a law which abolished the Board of Trustees and put the whole responsibility of administering the township schools under the control of the Township Trustee. The Trustee's main school functions included: building and maintenance, hiring and firing of teachers, and proposing tax levies.

A change in the law provided that a county examiner should replace the trustee in determining qualifications of teachers. This examiner, besides conducting public examinations for licensing teachers served also as a medium of communication between the district schools and the State Superintendent of Education.⁷ It was also his duty to visit schools and to do everything possible to upgrade the quality of teaching.

In 1873 the County Examiner was abolished and replaced by a County Superintendent of Schools. T.S. Fancher was the first to hold this office and his duties were the licensing of teachers; revocation of licenses

reports to state superintendent; visiting schools, etc.

MAJOR ETHNIC GROUP.

The people of the township had a voice in the affairs of the school in these early days. The ethnic background of these German settlers exerted a big influence on the curriculum of the various schools in the township.

The schools were used at night for meetings and other community affairs. In the early years the people of the district voted to decide on what textbooks would be used and whether or not German would be taught. In almost every annual directors meeting after 1864, the voters voted to petition the trustee to hire two teachers to teach in English and German.

As early as 1866, all teacher reports listed a textbook for every subject, usually in German and English. "Teachers Reports to the Trustee" indicate that beside the regular subjects German language and German History was also taught. Most of the textbooks were in English, but even toward the turn of the century and shortly thereafter much of the classroom conversation was in German.

The child usually entered school with no knowledge of English, many could understand only German, and in many cases, the teacher was also struggling with the language problem. Since teachers were usually

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chosen from the community, selection was based on his ability to teach and speak both German and "proper English." The district school masters were invariably a German and most likely a Catholic.⁹

TEACHERS.

Before church schools were reformed, nuns were hired to teach in the public schools and the pastor freely gave religious instruction in the various district schools. The records indicate that township trustees employed Catholic nuns for the purpose of teaching.¹⁰

The district teacher had all eight grades usually in one room. The teacher was also the janitor and custodian.

Most of the schools started at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m. Before 1870 school terms varied from 3 to 6 months, after which the school terms were uniformly set at 7 months. From 1890 to present the schools have been operating on a 9 month term.

Men teachers were in the majority, especially in the upper grades. The lower grades were often taught by Catholic nuns. Very few women other than nuns taught before 1890. Many of the teachers in St. John Township of long tenure were nuns.

Salaries. The salaries for men teachers varied from \$1.75 to \$2.75 per day between 1856 to 1892. Prior

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to 1866 Catholic nuns were paid higher rates than lay teachers. In the years between 1892 to 1900 a few salaries were listed at \$3.00 per day and one at \$4.25 per day. But from this point women were paid slightly more than men.

Facilities. The first schools were simple one or two room rectangular frame buildings equipped with a bell. A stove that burned wood was an integral part of the first schools and was usually located in the center of the room. By 1900 all the schools in the township were using coal for heat.

The school grounds usually were well fenced and nicely landscaped. Large play yards were the rule rather than the exception.

The interior room arrangements were basically as they are today - the style of furniture has changed. The teachers desk and lectern sat on a raised platform in the front of the room. Blackboards were located behind the teacher and the students in front all in neatly lined rows. The students sat on benches and used tables as work areas as opposed to the individual desks as we are familiar with today. The trend seems to be going back to the table and chair work area instead of the desk.

The exteriors of the buildings were kept in good repair. The various districts took pride in their

school buildings and yards. Even the horse drawn school buses were made as attractive as was possible. By 1900 nearly every district school had a school bus or were provided with some sort of similar service.

THEN AND NOW COMPARISON.

There were twelve district schools in the township with an estimated value of \$8300 in 1890.¹¹ Presently, with the organization of schools that was accomplished in 1966, the estimated value of the S schools in the township is approximately \$5,000,000. However, schools were built for a few hundred dollars during the district days, and now they are built for millions.

The tax rate for school purposes in 1853 amounted to 12¢ per \$100 and compared to \$6.80 in 1970.

In 1903 the attendance was 90. This figure increased to over 4500 by 1970. The population also increased from a little over a thousand in 1900 to over 15,000 in 1970.

TABLE 1

IDENTIFICATION AND CHRONOLOGY
ST. JOHN TOWNSHIP DISTRICT SCHOOLS

<u>DISTRICT</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>YEARS OF SERVICE</u>
1	Schererville	1853 - 1913
2	Leinen, Hoffman	1853 - 1907
3*	St. John	1853 - 1906
4	Portz, Kolly	1860 - 1917
5**	Dyer	1859 - 1898
6	Hermann	1863 - 1907
7	Dutton, Fries	1871 - 1928
8	Hartsdale, Rohrman	1881 - 1893
9	Troy	1886 - 1909
10	Hilbrich	1891 - 1905
11	Griffith	1893 - 1905
12	Bohling	1894 - 1907

*District #3 reopened from 1917 to 1925 before closing permanently.

**Dyer School never closed but took on a township identity about 1898. See explanation page 15.

TOWNSHIP DISTRICT SCHOOLS.

District No. 1. Schererville school was built in 1853. On June 20th of that year, the Board of Township Trustees issued this order: "Ordered that the money of and from the school funds are appropriated for the purpose to build the school."

This school served the educational needs of all the children of the few pioneer families who lived in this area of what is now the Town of Schererville. These people were, for the most part, German settlers.

In 1869 Schererville was platted and by 1870 there were 97 pupils in attendance. The opening of District No. 7 school east of Schererville eased this problem.

Two teachers were hired to teach German and English. Beginning in 1876 two teachers were hired each year until 1902.

Of important note was that Sister Elizabeth and Sister Josephine, Franciscan nuns, taught a total of 15 years in the primary grades.

When St. Michael's Catholic School opened in Schererville about 1900, enrollment in the public school decreased rapidly. Enrollment dropped so much so that District No. 1 School was closed for four years (1902-05) reopened for six years (1905-10) and finally closed.

In 1913 District No. 1 School came under the jurisdiction of the Schererville School System. The Schererville Schools, Nos. 1 and 8, were under a succession of Trustees until 1913. At this time Schererville received permission from the state to appoint a school board and thus became the School Town of Schererville.

District No. 2. Leinen or Hoffman School, as it was often called, began in 1853. The school was named after families living in the district. Attendance was large in the early years with a high of seventy seven pupils enrolled in 1866. The following year only thirty one pupils were listed. The decrease was due to the opening of the Catholic School in the township area.

With the coming of the parochial schools in the ensuing years at Dyer, St. John, and Schererville, the attendance at District No. 2 School declined and was closed in 1907.

District No. 3. St. John School covered the St. John town area. Although one of the first items to appear in the township records was an order by the school trustees, dated April 16, 1853, to "pay \$65.72 to H. Alexander a teacher in District No. 3", historians believe that a Catholic mission school, taught by Sisters and Brothers, had existed in St. John since 1846.¹²

Records leave the impression that the schools were closed from 1855 - 1893. In 1892-99 the trustees paid \$120 to Sister M. "for service as a teacher". The building which housed this school belonged to the Catholic parish. The records indicate that in 1892 the trustee paid the congregation \$89 for the building.

In 1874 a new two-room school was built for a cost of \$175. The enrollment continued to increase until in 1900 another school was built. The Catholic parish rented this school in 1903 and later purchased it. The building stood and was used by both parochial and public school systems for a short period. The building was used by the Catholic parish until 1968, when it was demolished and a new \$300,000 structure was erected on the same location.

Between the years of 1853 and 1903 District No. 3 School served the needs of the pioneer families of St. John. After 1903 the children of most of the families had attended the St. John the Evangelist Catholic School.

In answer to demands of the patrons in the neighborhood and an anticipation of an increase in the town's population, Trustee Joseph Gerlach built a brick school for St. John in 1917. But due to the Catholic population, by 1925 the attendance dropped so much that the school was closed. The non-parochial pupils were then transported to Dyer.¹²

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The school building was sold to the town of St. John and is used as the town hall. This was located at US 41 and Schmal Streets in St. John.

District No. 4. Portz School was built for \$150 in 1860 and was located about one mile east of Jackson Highway. Texts were written in English, but the language was German.

In the early 1900's the attendance dropped and in 1907 the school was closed. The closing of this school again was due to the heavy draw of the St. John Catholic School. However, Portz School did reopen in 1913 but closed again in 1917 when there were only eleven pupils enrolled.

The non-parochial students were transported to the St. John School No. 3 until 1925 when that school, as previously noted, also closed. The students were then transported to Dyer School No. 5. Needless to say there was a strong Catholic influence and population throughout the whole of St. John Township.

District No. 5. Dyer School fulfilled a need when in 1855 the Michigan Central & Joliet Railway established a station at Dyer. Three years later a town was platted. These events led to an increase in population in the area and as a result District School No. 5 was established in 1859.

The school was located about one block north of

US 30 on Hart Street where the Post Office is now located. By 1875 there were so many children in the district that a larger school was built on the site of the present Kanler Junior High.

William Esswein, a teacher, wrote the following in his annual report of 1883, "The school building has a beautiful location, surrounded by splendid trees."

For twelve years beginning in 1876 the lower grades were taught by Catholic nuns. German was both written and spoken. The enrollment raised a need for a larger building and one was completed in 1898.

But again, after St. Joseph Catholic School of Dyer opened its doors in 1900, the public school enrollment of District No. 5 dropped drastically. The drop was so severe that for several years only two teachers were needed in the district school.

Actually, about 1898, the Dyer School really lost the aura of the so-called "district school". As the outlying one-room schools began to close and as stated earlier their students were transported to Dyer. The township high school was organized in 1900 and located in Dyer. This really eliminated Dyer from the "district concept."

District No. 6. Hermann School was located between St. John and Dyer. The structure was completed in 1863 at a cost of \$175. Attendance did not vary considerably from year to year -- 25 pupils in 1870.

and 32 in 1893.

In the early 1900's so many pupils left to attend parochial schools that the school was closed, and the public school children were transported to Dyer. The school closed in 1907.

District No. 7. Dutton or Fries School as it was at times called, was named after the families living in the district. The construction cost of this school amounted to \$235 when it opened its doors in 1871. This school was located in what is now called New Elliott. This area did not contain a heavy concentration of German families.

During the early years the school must have been well-maintained because several teachers commented favorably about the school. In the annual "Report to the Trustee" one teacher specifically said, "The grounds are in good shape." However, it should be noted that there were many swamps and marshes located around the school.

The school for some reason or other had seen a great number of both men and women teachers. They usually stayed only a year or two.

The school continued in District No. 7 until 1923, even though in the later years, the average attendance was only about twenty-five pupils. The close of this school was not brought about because of religious schools, however, the enrollment was affected.

The closing was due to people in the area asking for better school conditions, so in 1928, most of the pupils were transferred to Schererville. The closing of Dutton School brought to an end the era of the "district school" in the whole township.

District No. 8. Hartsdale School or Rohman School as it was oft times called was built in 1881 and was located near US 41. Available pictures on file indicate that the building was kept in excellent condition. This school was built in an area of sparse population. When the school first opened, there were only 17 pupils in attendance. Later the number dropped and for four years from 1890-94, the school was closed.

It reopened in 1895 and again closed in 1907 as attendance again decreased. Withdrawals from Hartsdale are accounted for by the exodus to the Highland Christian School and mainly due to the Catholic school in the town of Schererville.

In 1913 the school became part of the Schererville School System. The building stood on its original site until it was destroyed by fire in 1961.

District No. 9. Troy or Theis School was named also from the families in the area. In 1886 Trustee Bernard Scheidt paid R. Maginot \$458 for building the school. Both these names are still very familiar in the township. The school was located at Cedar Road and Colfax Street.

Nineteen pupils were listed as attending in 1898 and only fifteen in 1908. In 1905 this part of the township became a part of the town of Griffith, but the building remained in use as a township school for the next three years.

District No. 10. Hilbrich School was located near what is now Chapel Lawn Cemetery on Jackson Highway. Twenty three pupils were enrolled in 1891 when the school opened. However, this school was in session for only fourteen years. Records indicate that at the turn of the century, pupils began to withdraw and enroll in one of the Catholic schools in St. John or Schererville. Again, the exodus to the parochial schools caused this school to finally close its doors in 1905.

District No. 11. This was the Griffith School and resulted from an industrial boom to that area. Some two years before the Columbus Exposition of 1892 and 1893, early Griffith showed a remarkable growth.¹⁵ The growth of the area resulted from a real estate boom which in turn attracted industries and the railroads.

Even though many students from St. John Township attended this school, it was never really a part of the township. Rather, the school belonged more to the town of Griffith, which is primarily in North Township. This school was absorbed into the Griffith system in 1905.

District No. 12. Bohling School was the last of the district schools built in St. John Township. It cost \$475 and was located on Jackson Highway at the Crown Point - St. John Road which was and is still the Bohling farm.

The school opened in 1894 with 16 pupils enrolled and reached a high of 29 pupils in 1900. When the Catholic school in St. John opened in 1903 several pupils transferred. From that time attendance decreased rapidly, until this school too, was forced closed in 1907.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION.

A priceless heritage that the Catholic pioneers brought from their German homelands to St. John Township was their deep religious faith. The strong ethnic ties of the people permeated their schools to such an extent that German language and history were a part of the curriculum.

Since both the teachers and pupils were of German decent, the German language was spoken and taught almost equally with the English language untill WWI.

In 1900 there were twelve public schools in St. John Township with sixteen teachers and four hundred students. Eight years later there were only six teachers and ninety pupils. The sharp drop in enrollment resulted in a very small part to the incorporation of

Griffith in 1905. District Schools Nos. 9 and 11 then became part of the Griffith School System.

By 1906 the schools were hard pressed to remain open due to shrinking enrollments. A year later, District Schools Nos. 2, 3, 6, 10, and 12 had been closed, and the public school children were transported to Dyer and Schererville.

Schererville incorporated in 1913 and District Schools Nos. 1 and 8 were absorbed into the new system. District Schools Nos. 4 and 7 remained. Portz School was permanently closed in 1917. The Dutton School remained open until 1928. The closing of this school brought to an end the one-room public school on the district concept which began in 1853.

The major factor affecting the sharp decline in the public schools by 1908 was the fact that Catholic schools were opened in Dyer and Schererville in 1900 and in St. John three years later. Due to the opening of these three schools, seven of the twelve public schools in the township were closed permanently sometime between 1905 - 1909, and three more were temporarily closed from 1906 to 1910.

The dominant religion among these pioneers was the Catholic faith. The township officials, who were German Catholics, had no qualms about hiring nuns or brothers to teach in their public schools. Parish priests regularly held religious instruction in the

in the schools.

As we have seen, when the Catholic schools were opened, the people withdrew their children from the free public schools and entered them into one of the Catholic schools. This was done at such an alarming rate that it caused most of the public schools to be closed due to the lack of an adequate enrollment.

Since the overwhelming percentage of the people in the township at this time were of the Catholic faith, their children were withdrawn from the public schools and enrolled in the Catholic schools. This action brought about by the exodus to the Catholic schools resulted in the reorganization of the public school system in the whole of St. John Township and its individual towns.

AFTERTHOUGHT.

Pressures were exerted by the large German population on the district schools to incorporate German language and history into the curriculum. They succeeded in accomplishing their goal for over sixty years. Today, we can see similar pressures being exerted by the Black community on their schools to incorporate Black History into the curriculum. At this time it is too early to evaluate the success or failure of the Black effort, as the full impact is yet to be felt.

As one notes the material about the old schools had on the district school during the period of 1853 - 1910, one cannot help but also note the similarity of the affects the "neighborhood schools" in the urban areas could be having on the "neighborhood schools" of today.

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